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Letter dated 6 September 1996 from the Chairman of the Committee on Conferences to the Chairman of the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee)

Judging from the numerous examples that have been brought to the attention of the Committee on Conferences, it would appear that many intergovernmental bodies are under the impression that conference-servicing resources are abundant if not unlimited, to draw a parallel with natural resources. In fact, the demand for services continues to grow even as the Organization endeavours to cut back in response to the increasingly severe financial constraints it is experiencing.

Conference-servicing resources are the fuel that keep the Organization's parliamentary machinery running smoothly. However, there is a price to pay for these services. At Headquarters, the notional cost of a single page of documentation in the six official languages is $916, of which $602 stems from translation; the notional cost of one meeting is $4,553, of which $4,194 stems from interpretation. Several years ago, the Committee on Conferences set a benchmark figure of 80 per cent for utilization of allocated conference resources. In 1995, overall utilization at Headquarters, Geneva and Vienna was down to 76 per cent, owing to late starting and early ending of meetings and sessions and repeated cancellation of meetings. Here is another eye-opening figure: if the start of every meeting in New York during a calendar year were delayed 10 minutes, the loss in unutilized conference-servicing resources would amount to around $875,000.

Fortunately, there are common-sense solutions to conserve resources. As a first step, bodies could review their needs with a view to rationalizing requests for services. As for tactics to save time, experience shows that the Chairman's presence in the Conference Room sets an example for other delegates to arrive punctually; full use of meeting time could be ensured if meetings were convened only when an adequate number of speakers are inscribed on the list and

if several items were placed on the agenda; sessions could possibly be shortened if a time limit for speakers were set. During the planning stage, arrangements could be made to dovetail brief sessional meetings with those of a body's regional groups or other bodies meeting on an "as available" basis; and if Conference Services is informed at least a day in advance of a cancellation, the resources thus released can be "recycled" to other groups.

But the conference room is not the only front on which the campaign for improved utilization must be waged. There are also mountains of documentation to be attacked and reduced. Here again, several action-oriented manoeuvres could be carried out: bodies could review their recurrent documentation and eliminate what they deem to be unnecessary; some reports could be considered on a biennial or triennial basis; agenda items could be merged and reports consolidated accordingly; bodies could request oral reports rather than written ones and more important still, they could exercise restraint in making proposals containing requests for new reports.

Clearly, intergovernmental bodies are responsible for ensuring rational utilization of conference-servicing resources. The key to the success of this operation to conserve limited resources is the will to redouble efforts so as to reverse a critical situation. I trust we can count on your cooperation in this common cause.

(Signed) El Hassane ZAHID
Chairman
Committee on Conferences